Board Member, Parent, and Family Identity in Community Youth Sport

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Socio-Cultural - Family (Youth Sport) Saturday, June 9, 2018
20-minute oral presentation (including questions) 2:20 PM
Abstract 2018-368 Room: Sable D

Relevance of The Topic to Sport Management: Community sport forms the largest sector of sport volunteers; however, volunteerism at the community level remains relatively understudied in comparison to elite and professional sport organizations (Taylor & Morgan, 2017). Further, familial influences of sport board members have not been explored in depth, yet it is widely acknowledged that within the delivery of community youth sport programs, parent volunteers are essential to its success (Messner, 2009). This oversight is unfortunate as the majority of sport policy and programming is enacted at the community sport club level (Thibault & Harvey, 2013). Given the importance of the decisions that are being made at the local level of youth sport, understanding factors that influence board functioning is critical to ensuring quality outcomes for sport programming (Kerwin, Doherty, & Harman, 2012). With a greater understanding of the role of identity in decision-making, strategies can be suggested to help ensure these board processes are inclusive and directed towards club goals/priorities.

Conceptual Framework: In all sports, volunteers are the lifeblood – “take away the volunteers and the sport dies” (de Cruz, 2005, p. 83). The investigation and importance of sport volunteerism has been the focus of several published special issues in the European Journal for Sport Management/European Sport Management Quarterly (1999; 2013) and Sport Management Review (2006). Within the delivery of community youth sport programs, the contributions of parent volunteers are particularly noteworthy and instrumental (Cuskelley, 2005; Nichols, 2005). It is clear that youth sport volunteers are more likely to become involved because their children participate in the community sport club (Doherty, 2006). For example, Busser and Carruthers (2010) found that the majority of coaches had a child on the team (90%). Research has reported that men tend to be more involved in youth sport volunteerism, are married with dependents at home, 35-44 years of age, and with a significant proportion having post-secondary education (Busser & Carruthers, 2010; De Knop et al., 1999; Doherty, 2005; Doherty, 2006; Kim et al., 2010). Yet, a critical examination of volunteer labour reveals that mothers are also heavily involved in youth sport volunteerism, in an invisible or informal capacity that may be difficult to measure. Indeed, key qualitative studies in Australia (Thompson, 1999), Canada (Trussell & Shaw, 2012), the United Kingdom (Kirk & McPhail, 2003), and the United States (Messner & Bozada-Deas, 2009) highlight the gendered dimensions of volunteer work in youth sport clubs. Although it is known that parents and family members volunteer their time for various roles in community sport clubs (Taylor & Morgan, 2017); relatively little is understood regarding the influence of that involvement on sport club functioning. As noted by Kerwin (2013), board members identify with individuals or groups within their sport club that directly (or indirectly) influences conflict and disagreement. Kerwin examined this process of influence using social identity theory where the focus is on a person’s knowledge that he or she belongs to a social category or group (Hogg & Abrams, 1988). In the case of sport boards, Kerwin outlined that sport board members may define themselves by multiple social groups, which impacts board functioning (conflict). Specifically, she found that sport board members identify as members of the local community as well as members of the athlete group for which the sport club serves. These potentially competing social groups resulted in low levels of conflict for board members during critical decision making. Further, Locke and Heere (2017) discussed the importance of recognizing the unique influences of social and role identity in sport organizations. Complementing social identity theory (defined above), identity theory refers to the parts of one’s self that consist of the meanings that are attached to the “multiple roles [individuals] typically play in highly differentiated contemporary societies” (Stryker, 1980, p. 284). Moreover, each identity will impact expectations, behaviours and interactions within the group/board (Stryker & Statham, 1985). Both social and role identity may be particularly relevant for community sport clubs in that board members may identify with multiple roles and social groups such as parent, board member, athlete, or former athlete. And theoretically, it is reasonable to assume that identity and identity conflicts (e.g., parent versus sport club representative) may play a role in the development (and management) of community sport board decision making. Further, given that “characteristics such as gender, sex, and sexuality do not only take the form of identities, but also social positions that possess societal status and power (Burman, 2002)” (Satore & Cunningham, 2010, p. 495-496) it is important to understand how board members’ diverse social identities, as well as that of their families’, influence
sport programming decision making and conflict. As key studies in community youth sport research have made clear, parents diverse social identities and their children’s involvement in sport clubs may influence board functioning, and more specifically program planning and delivery. For example, Trussell, Kovac, and Apgar (2017) found that LGBTQ parents discreetly challenged incidents of enacted stigma and sexual prejudice through educating league organizers about inclusive language and policies. Dyck (2012) described how a board member who had a child with a disability influenced the delivery of programs creating accessible options for all children. In both examples, the potential for family members with diverse social identities to advocate, educate, and enhance club policies and programming is clearly evident.

It is clear, too, that the existing research has failed to take into consideration the potential impact of volunteer roles on the family unit. Although there is limited research in the field of sport management, we can garner a sense of the potential significance of these experiences in their lives. Research on parental perspectives emphasizes that the dual role of parent-coach/child-athlete may be a complex relationship fraught with contradictions. For example, Weiss and Fretwell (2005) reported that fathers were seen to take pride in seeing their son’s achievements and they saw it as an important opportunity for their skill and social development. At the same time, their experiences were defined by negative aspects such as challenging the parent-child relationship with rebellious behavior, difficulty separating the coach from the parent role, and greater pressure and higher expectations related to their son’s leadership and performance. Other research has also highlighted the implications of parents coaching their own children. Leberman and LaVoi (2011) reported that mothers who coached their children enjoyed aspects of quality time, the opportunity to facilitate positive development (e.g., self-esteem), and the importance of their children (and particularly sons) seeing them (mothers) in a leadership position. However, these authors also reported that some women struggled to juggle the dual roles of parent-coach. Similar to adult perspectives, parental volunteerism in community sport for young people does not come without consequences and can be seen as inherently contradictory (Trussell, 2016).

Objectives: The objective of this paper is to examine the ways in which youth sport board member multiple role identities and social identities may compliment or conflict with one another during community sport board functioning (e.g., decision making and conflict) as well as within family relationships.

Implications & Contribution to the Body of Knowledge: This conceptual paper brings to the forefront a critical discussion of the decision making within youth sport club boards regarding sport policies and programming. Specifically, by anchoring the discussion in the multiple roles and social identities of community sport club board members and how familial identities influence club policies and programming decision making, it illuminates the effects, both intended and unintended. This paper will also take up the potential impact of these experiences on familial relationships and provides an in-depth inquiry into this phenomenon.